

Leuenberger, S. (2013) *Review of: Re-Emergence: Locating Conscious Properties in a Material World, by Gerald Vision*. *Mind*, 122 (486). pp. 593-596. ISSN 0026-4423

Copyright © 2013 Mind Association

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

Content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/86719/>

Deposited on: 14 October 2013

Re-Emergence. Locating Conscious Properties in a Material World, by Gerald Vision.
Cambridge (Mass.) and London: MIT Press, 2011.

In the last twenty-five years, there has been a steady trickle of articles about emergence, and more recently, edited collections have been devoted to the topic. As far as I am aware, the work under review offers the first book-length treatment since C.D. Broad's *Mind and Its Place in Nature* (1925).

The book is divided into two parts, "Emergentism of the Mental Described and Defended", and "Orthodox Alternatives". The second part contains chapters on physicalism, representationalism, and the token identity theory. It is supposed to provide indirect motivation for the view presented in the first part, by pointing out difficulties with the views that Vision takes to be the main competitors. In this review, I shall focus on the first part.

Chapter 1, "History and Background", introduces emergentism and some of its rivals. In chapter 2, "Fleshing Out the View", Vision attempts to clarify some of the concepts used in his characterization of emergence, and very briefly discusses alternative characterizations. Chapter 3, "Coincidence: Realization and Identity" defends the view that a piece of clay may constitute a statue without being identical to it. It may not be obvious why this discussion deserved such a prominent place in a book on emergence. But the example of the statue and the clay is supposed to show that constitution does not entail identity, and serves as a precedent for the claim that realization – which is a species of constitution – does not entail identity. Chapter 4, "The Menace of Non-Physical Causation", defends downward causation against the exclusion argument; and chapter 5, "Belief, Desire, and the Physical", expands the scope of the emergentist view from phenomenal consciousness to intentionality and action.

Emergentism is often accused of being an unstable or even incoherent position. It is thus incumbent on its proponents to provide a careful and rigorous formulation. Vision offers us the following (pp. 14-15, emphasizes his):

Imagine that E is a representative sample of the properties of concern. To be emergent, E must meet the following conditions:

- (1) E is *dependent* on different sorts of a non-emergent base in a way made manifest by E's *supervenience* (or *realization*) on those same properties.
- (2) There is *no* further (minimal) *explanation* of why E is supervenient on (or dependent on, or realized by) that non-emergent base, viz., the relationship is brute.
- (3) E is a cause (of both mental and physical aspects) in ways in which there is no sufficient cause in context at the levels of E's non-emergent base(s).

I leave it open whether the supervenience or realization base is itself a property, a collection of properties, or something else.

In its general structure, this account is a typical representative of those that have been offered in the literature. Emergent properties are Janus-faced: in some way, they are dependent on their base; and in some other way, they are independent. The challenge for those who defend

the coherence of emergence is to articulate in what ways, exactly, they are dependent or independent.

One popular strategy invokes the distinction between metaphysical and merely nomological supervenience. Vision allows that the emergent is metaphysically supervenient. It remained unclear to me whether he also wishes to allow that a property that fails to be metaphysically supervenient may still be emergent. The lack of relevant discussion reflects the book's concern with the debate between physicalism and anti-physicalism. Vision rejects substance dualism. But he shows little interest in placing emergentism on a map of non-physicalist positions, such as different versions of property dualism or panpsychism

Another strategy invokes the distinction between the modal and the explanatory: while there is a modal connection between the base and the emergent property, there is no explanatory connection. This is Vision's strategy, broadly speaking. He claims that the supervenience is unexplained, rather than that the instantiation of the emergent property is unexplained, but I take it that those two explanatory gaps are closely related.

This strategy faces at least two challenges. First, it may appear to turn emergentism from a claim about the world into a claim about us. What counts as an explanation may depend on our cognitive make-up, after all. In response, Vision stresses that he uses an ontological conception of explanation. While such an explanation needs to be "in principle apprehensible by other possible creatures" (p. 52), it need not be so apprehensible by us. At any rate, this challenge is not too pressing for Vision, given the dialectic. He insists, following other authors, that physicalism is committed to superdupervenience – explained supervenience. So if the challenge were successful, it would threaten physicalism along with emergentism as defined by him.

A second challenge, which Vision does not consider, arises from emergentism's apparent commitment to brute necessities, and turns on difficult questions in modal epistemology. It is loosely based on Fitch's observation that we can never know that a particular truth is unknown. As a consequence of (1), there are facts about the base that necessitate the facts about emergent properties, but as a consequence of (2), there is no explanation for this necessity. It is true that there may be good reason to think that there are brute necessities. It is plausible, after all, that the modal is not constitutively tied to the epistemic or explanatory. However, it is not clear whether we can ever be justified in the claim that some particular proposition – in this case, a conditional with a conjunction of physical truths in the antecedent and a mental truth in the consequent – is a brute necessity. The worry is that whatever provides justification for believing that a proposition is necessary would also explain the necessity, at least partially. In principle, the two things can come apart – God might tell us that some proposition is necessary, even if there is no explanation for its necessity. But whether they can come apart in our epistemic situation is a different question. A mere constant conjunction of some type of physical and some type of mental type of affairs, for example, would not explain the necessity of the corresponding conditional. But neither would it justify the belief that the conditional is more than an accidental generalization, I take it.

The requirement (3) of Vision's account, that emergent properties have novel causal powers, is quite standard. It is clear that Vision has no sympathy for epiphenomenal versions of dualism. By (3), they do not count as emergentist.

I now turn to a more detailed discussion of clause (1) in the above account. An obvious problem with (1) is circularity: the word 'non-emergent' is used in the characterization of 'emergent'. In some contexts, circularity is a feature, not a bug. Here, however, it seems gratuitous: it appears that 'non-emergent' could be deleted. This would be advantageous even if we are not worried about circularity: it would allow that some properties could emerge relative to a base that is itself emergent from a further base. Presumably, Broad and other historical emergentists held that the mental is emergent relative to the biological, and that the latter is itself emergent relative to the chemical. On such a view, there could be chains of emergence. Vision's formulation does not allow that.

Further, the use of the term 'base' is problematic in (1). It would be good to use a more neutral term, which does not already suggest dependence, and thus threatens to make (1) analytic. It is also unclear whether every property is assumed to have a unique base, and what a base consists of. One can speculate that bases consist of properties, of a suitably restricted class, possessed by proper parts of the things that have E. But Vision does not tell us. He may wish for his account to be neutral with respect to some of these questions, and to eschew specific commitments. The same desire explains his use of the disjunction "*supervenience* (or *realization*)". As he says in another context: "too precise a formulation could be an obstacle to covering slightly divergent conceptions" (p. 150). To me, this seems like a confusion between precision and specificity. A term or concept can be very precise and still highly general, covering even radically divergent conceptions. Supervenience, rigorously defined, is a good example.

To be fair to Vision, he may not be that interested in delineating the exact commitments of emergentism. In other words, he may not be concerned with correctly classifying different views as emergentist or non-emergentist. Rather, he wishes to flesh out and defend a particular emergentist position. The two projects may be best pursued separately. Any characterization of emergentism is likely to be quite general, leaving room for different versions. On the other hand, it is unlikely to be broad enough to be able to be supported by one sweeping argument. Developing a plausible account would require a great deal of detailed work, some of which would go beyond the minimal commitments of emergentism.

Vision is clearly resourceful, and shows stamina in addressing various objections. It is regrettable that the development of his positive proposal is lacking in detail and rigour.

STEPHAN LEUENBERGER
School of Humanities
University of Glasgow
Glasgow
G12 8QQ
UNITED KINGDOM